

# A Close Reading of Patrick Henry's Speech to the Virginia Convention

## Directions

*Read the following passage silently. Try to determine Henry's message.*

**St. John's Church, Richmond, Virginia**

**March 23, 1775**

Mr. President, no man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism<sup>1</sup>, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House<sup>2</sup>. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining as I do, opinions of a character<sup>3</sup> very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments<sup>4</sup> freely, and without reserve<sup>5</sup>. This is no time for ceremony<sup>6</sup>. The question before the House is one of awful moment to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery; and in proportion<sup>7</sup> to the magnitude<sup>8</sup> of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate. It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at truth, and fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offence, I should consider myself as guilty of treason<sup>9</sup> towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the majesty of heaven, which I revere<sup>10</sup> above all earthly kings.

Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt<sup>11</sup> to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren<sup>12</sup> till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous<sup>13</sup> struggle for liberty? Are we disposed<sup>14</sup> to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation<sup>15</sup>? For my part, whatever anguish<sup>16</sup> of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct<sup>17</sup> of the British ministry for the last ten years, to justify<sup>18</sup> those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace<sup>19</sup> themselves, and the House? Is it that insidious<sup>20</sup> smile with which our petition has

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<sup>1</sup> patriotism: love of country and willingness to sacrifice for it

<sup>2</sup> House: group of elected officials who represent the people

<sup>3</sup> character: distinctive nature of something; personality

<sup>4</sup> sentiments: opinions

<sup>5</sup> reserve: holding back

<sup>6</sup> ceremony: formal occasion; traditions

<sup>7</sup> proportion: part compared to a whole

<sup>8</sup> magnitude: great size or extent of something

<sup>9</sup> treason: act of betraying one's country

<sup>10</sup> revere: to feel deep respect or admiration for something

<sup>11</sup> apt: having a tendency to do something; likely

<sup>12</sup> siren: mythological creatures whose singing lured sailors to their deaths

<sup>13</sup> arduous: involving or requiring serious effort; difficult

<sup>14</sup> disposed: inclined or willing

<sup>15</sup> temporal salvation: safety in daily life

<sup>16</sup> anguish: severe mental or physical pain

<sup>17</sup> conduct: behavior

<sup>18</sup> justify: to show or prove right or reasonable

<sup>19</sup> solace: comfort

<sup>20</sup> insidious: treacherous; harmful and sneaky

been lately received? Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss. Ask yourselves how this gracious<sup>21</sup> reception of our petition comports<sup>22</sup> with these war-like preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation<sup>23</sup>? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled, that force must be called in to win back our love? Let us not deceive<sup>24</sup> ourselves, sir. These are the implements<sup>25</sup> of war and subjugation<sup>26</sup>; the last arguments to which kings resort. I ask, gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array<sup>27</sup>, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation<sup>28</sup> of navies and armies? No, sir, she has none. They are meant for us; they can be meant for no other. They are sent over to bind and rivet<sup>29</sup> upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging<sup>30</sup>. And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication<sup>31</sup>? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves. Sir, we have done everything that could be done, to avert<sup>32</sup> the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated<sup>33</sup>; we have supplicated; we have prostrated<sup>34</sup> ourselves before the throne, and have implored<sup>35</sup> its interposition<sup>36</sup> to arrest the tyrannical<sup>37</sup> hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned<sup>38</sup>, with contempt, from the foot of the throne. In vain<sup>39</sup>, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. There is no longer any room for hope. If we wish to be free if we mean to preserve inviolate<sup>40</sup> those inestimable<sup>41</sup> privileges for which we have been so long contending<sup>42</sup> if we mean not basely<sup>43</sup> to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained, we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!

They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable<sup>44</sup> an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a

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<sup>21</sup> gracious: kind and well-mannered

<sup>22</sup> comports: behaves well

<sup>23</sup> reconciliation: ending rivalry or feud; getting back together

<sup>24</sup> deceive: to trick or be dishonest with

<sup>25</sup> implements: tools used for specific purposes

<sup>26</sup> subjugation: forced submission; controlled by others

<sup>27</sup> martial array: arrangement of soldiers or battleships

<sup>28</sup> accumulation: collection

<sup>29</sup> rivet: to join or fasten to metal

<sup>30</sup> forging: creating out of metal

<sup>31</sup> entreaty and humble supplication: begging

<sup>32</sup> avert: to avoid

<sup>33</sup> remonstrated: made forceful protest

<sup>34</sup> prostrated: laid flat on the ground in submission

<sup>35</sup> implored: begged

<sup>36</sup> interposition: intervention; interference

<sup>37</sup> tyrannical: exercising power cruelly

<sup>38</sup> spurned: rejected

<sup>39</sup> vain: producing no result; useless

<sup>40</sup> inviolate: not violated; whole

<sup>41</sup> inestimable: cannot be measured

<sup>42</sup> contending: fighting

<sup>43</sup> basely: rudely

<sup>44</sup> formidable: worthy of respect

British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength by irresolution<sup>45</sup> and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance, by lying supinely<sup>46</sup> on our backs, and hugging the delusive<sup>47</sup> phantom of hope, until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. Three millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant<sup>48</sup>, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking<sup>49</sup> may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come.

It is in vain, sir, to extenuate<sup>50</sup> the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale<sup>51</sup> that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding<sup>52</sup> arms! Our brethren<sup>53</sup> are already in the field! Why stand we here idle<sup>54</sup>? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

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<sup>45</sup> irresolution: no solution

<sup>46</sup> supinely: lying on one's back

<sup>47</sup> delusive: giving false or misleading impression

<sup>48</sup> vigilant: watchful; paying careful attention to

<sup>49</sup> clanking: loud noise, often chains banging together

<sup>50</sup> extenuate: to drag out; to make something go longer

<sup>51</sup> gale: strong wind

<sup>52</sup> resounding: unmistakable; emphatic

<sup>53</sup> brethren: fellow Christians

<sup>54</sup> idle: not moving

**Initial Reflection**

*Write a brief paragraph of three to five sentences summarizing Henry's message in this speech. Include the author and title in your topic sentence.*

**Example**

In his speech to the Virginia Convention, Patrick Henry's message is \_\_\_\_\_.

**Directions to Listen**

*Now follow along as this speech is read to you. Notice how Henry develops his message.*

### Text-Dependent Questions

*Answer the following using complete sentences.*

1. What is Henry's overall position? What does he want the House to do?
2. Who is his audience?
3. What is Henry's tone in this speech?
4. Henry begins his speech with "Mr. President, no man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights." Why does he begin this way? What impact might this beginning have on his audience? What does he mean by "lights"?
5. How does Henry appeal to his audience's emotions in the first paragraph? Use quotations to support your answer.

6. What appeal to authority does Henry include in the first paragraph? Why would he include it? To what does he compare this authority?
7. In the second paragraph, Henry refers to the “illusions of hope.” Using details from the text, explain what he means by this phrase.
8. In the third paragraph, Henry discusses the “lamp of experience.” Since it is not an actual lamp, explain what Henry means by this phrase.
9. This speech motivated the House to engage the British forces and led to the War for Independence. Henry makes an argument detailing what the colonists did to work with Britain and how Britain responded. Using at least four different examples from the text, explain what Henry believes the colonists have done.

What the colonists try	How Britain responds

10. Why does Henry believe war is appropriate now?

11. In the last paragraph, Henry states his position or call to action. What is it? What is its effect? How does he develop his rhetoric?

12. Fill in the chart below with examples of Henry's use of ethos, pathos, and logos. Find one quote showing when Henry uses this rhetorical device, then explain how this quote is an example of this type of rhetoric.

Type of Rhetoric	Quote from Speech	How is this quote an example of this type of rhetoric?
Ethos		
Pathos		
Logos		

## Final Reflection

*Now that you have examined the text several times and completed text-dependent questions, you should have a deeper understanding of this speech. Write a full paragraph of seven to 10 sentences explaining how Henry uses rhetoric to persuade his audience. How does he create and develop his argument? Include the author and title in your topic sentence. Include at least two quotes from the text to support your answer, making sure all quotes are introduced with signal phrases.*

### Examples

In his speech to the Virginia Convention, Patrick Henry argues for \_\_\_\_\_ using \_\_\_\_\_.

Henry uses pathos when he says, "\_\_\_\_\_."

Henry states, "\_\_\_\_\_."

Henry persuades his audience by \_\_\_\_\_.